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Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[12 February 2016]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Tightening of China's policy dealing with the freedom of the internet

Society of Threatened People is highly concerned about the severe tightening of the People's Republic of China's policy dealing with the freedom of the internet.

For years, China has tried to control what its citizens can or cannot access online. Tools like the "Great Firewall" and the more recently developed "Great Cannon" contributed to the insulation of the content which can be found by Chinese internet users.

As a consequence Chinese citizens have no access to material that could trigger social unrest. A recent example is the "Fishball Revolution" in Hong Kong, news about which cannot accessed in other parts of China.

In 2015, the Chinese surveillance apparatus even targeted the providers of virtual private networks which made up the last way to access the international World Wide Web. Since then the PRC is closer to a Chinese Intranet than ever before.

For journalists or bloggers, who do not comply with the law by self-censorship the government employs a diverse range of methods including dismissals, demotion, libel lawsuits, fines, arrests and forced television confessions.

Of 153 journalists held in detention worldwide in the year 2015, China held 23. Since 2012, the number of bloggers and other netizens detained for "cybercrimes" increased seriously. In August 2015 the Chinese police stated it had arrested about 15,000 people for crimes that "jeopardize Internet security".

In January 2016, rights activist Jang Haitao was sentenced to 19 years in prison for "inciting subversion of state power" and "probing and illegally supplying intelligence abroad". Jang operated merely online. His activities included the signing of a dissident petition and the providing of information to overseas media outlets like Radio Free Asia.

However, an increasing amount of citizens of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region fear suppression through online sources. In 2009, riots in the province capital Urumqi caused a shutdown of the internet for 10 months. In the following year saw an increasingly curtailed internet in Xinjiang.

The most recent development, caused by the terroristic attacks in Paris 2015, are police controls searching mobile phones of Uyghurs for religious content. Members of the traditionally Muslim minority switched to use simple cell phones instead of smartphones because no internet-based communication seems to be secure anymore.

The Chinese government aims for 'internet sovereignty'.

In 2013, the Central Leading Group of Cybersecurity and Information was founded. Moreover, the State Internet Information Office was renamed in Cyberspace Administration of China and empowered with regulating online content.

In June 2015, a new national security law was adopted. A core component of the law is to make all key network infrastructure and information systems "secure and controllable". First concerns were voiced by multinationals and industry groups, this imprecise formulation might be used to force companies to install backdoors and hand over source codes.

In December 2015 the Anti-Terrorism-Law was passed, according to which companies have to assist the government in carrying out terroristic investigations. The companies are required to provide "technical means of support" for anti-terror investigations, including decrypting data.

The two laws awake fears of both industrial espionage and international companies becoming an integral part in China's internet policy.

In December 2015, during the General Assembly of the United Nations, Chinese officials tried to convince other government to reach a consensus on a document which promoted a multilateral control over the internet. Also Chinese officials tried to delete phrases like "freedom of expression" or "democratic" in the draft form. Though in the final version, those phrases were still present China appeared satisfied that the document was recognized "a leading role" for governments in cybersecurity matters relating to national security.

In December 2015, China was host of the second World Internet Conference (WIC). President Xi Jinping and other high officials of the Chinese information sector promoted their ideas of multilateral internet governance and voted against the multi-stakeholder model. Criticism was voiced from non-governmental organisations such as "Reporters without Borders", regarding the legitimacy which is granted to the WIC (and thus the Chinese internet policy) by the presence of a leader in the tech industry such as the ICANN company's CEO, Fadi Chehade.

In 2014, China announced the implementation of a "social credit system" until 2020. The system is meant to "construct a social credit environment of sincerity, self-discipline, trust-keeping and mutual trust". Though no detailed information about methods are known, concerns are voiced about the government-approved pilot projects by Chinese companies. The most prominent one is "Sesame Credit" which is launched by the IT giant Alibaba and estimates credit worthiness. Citizens are judged not only by conventional financial criteria, but by their actions and associations.

Many experts fear that the Chinese government could implement a system which scores citizens according to all their actions including the actions of their friends. Low scores would thereby lead to disadvantages in daily life (e.g. on the job market). Naturally, the source of information was the internet. Such system represented the most thorough surveillance ever seen and would cause pressure without the need of executive forces.

Recommendations:
The status of the Internet as a free and independent medium must be restored. International rules shall be adopted which ensure that the power of the internet contributes to the well-being of the world's citizens and cannot be abused by nations to use them to suppress perceived dissent.

Society for Threatened People calls on the Human Rights Council to urge China to respect according legislations and to take firm steps to preserve the international community of the dangers of state sovereignty regarding the internet.